BEYOND WILDERNESS
March 1, 2009

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 25:1-10
Exodus 3:1-6
Mark 1:9-15

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan . . . and the angels waited on him"
Mark 1:13 (NRSV)

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Kathleen Norris
Acedia & Me

We come to Lent, again, good and gracious God, come to acknowledge the distance between who you created us to be and who we are. We come to acknowledge our limits, our mortality. We come to acknowledge that sometimes life is wilderness.
Come to us — be with us — speak a word of truth to us.
Amen

Sitting at my desk on Wednesday afternoon, Ash Wednesday, still thinking about the words the minister said to me an hour before as she placed the sign of the cross with ashes on my forehead: "John, remember that from dust you have come and to dust you will return," I received an email from a son. The three-year-old child of a friend, a college teammate, and now assistant basketball coach at the College of Wooster where they both played, had been killed in an accident near Cleveland. It was icy. The SUV in which the little boy was riding flipped over. Everyone got out safely. Then another car skidded at the same spot and hit the three-year-old. "Will you write a note to my friend? I don't know what to say." So I did, feeling as inadequate as my son did, wrote a note to an utterly devastated young father. I had planned to call a friend in another city who had begun a course of chemotherapy that morning. So I did, in late afternoon, Ash Wednesday. His diagnosis is frightening. His prognosis is uncertain. We talked about the relative prospects of the Cincinnati Reds — his team, and the Cubs, as we have over the years. We laughed a bit. He kidded me,

about the Cubs' collapse in the playoffs which seemed to give him particular pleasure. And then he said, "I don't know how this is going to turn out, but we're hopeful. We're in good hands." Sitting there with ashes of my own mortality on my forehead I pondered the kinds of unplanned wildernesses in which we find ourselves on occasion: the wilderness of crushing grief; the wilderness of serious illness and extended and difficult treatment.

It is how the Christian season of Lent begins, with an acknowledgment of human mortality and a recognition that before it is over life will likely put us in some kind of wilderness, and for many of us, already has.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that it is hard for a healthy adult to hear "'Remember, from dust you have come and to dust you will return:' . . . for a three-year-old or a person gaunt from chemotherapy it can sound too harsh for words." "No danger" Barbara quips that Ash Wednesday and Lent will be appropriated by the culture and commercialized. "No danger that Hallmark will design a card nor that merchants will dress their windows in sackcloth and ashes," although it did occur to me that it might not be inappropriate given what is happening, or not happening, in the malls and boutiques on Michigan Avenue these days. (How will we survive without our neighbor, Borders?) Ash Wednesday, Lent, Good Friday, Crucifixion — these are not market-friendly concepts (see Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin, The Lost Language of Salvation*, p. 71).

The aim of Lent, of course, is to get us appropriately to Easter. Easter takes preparation. The simple gladness, the almost unspeakable joy of Easter requires a little disciplined work, a little honest pondering of the human condition. Resurrection doesn't happen in a bubble. It comes after suffering, crucifixion, dying.

So from the beginning, Christian people have gotten themselves ready for the big day by traveling with Jesus on the way to the cross, sometimes making sacrifices themselves to identify with his self-sacrifice, stopping along the way to ponder the ways his journey and our journeys intersect. And the way it begins, in each of the accounts we have of his journey, the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — is with a character called John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, a life changing experience of God, and sense of new direction, new vocation, and then three of the four Gospels, the earliest, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all agree that the very next thing that happens is that Jesus goes into the wilderness: for forty days to be exact. While he is there he is tempted by Satan, and at the end of it angels come to him. Then he emerges and the story of his remarkable three-year campaign of teaching, healing, reconciling, saving commences.

Let's focus, just for a moment, on the way Mark — by the way, most people who know about these things agree that Mark is the oldest, the first of the

four Gospels to be written — let's look for a moment and how Mark tells it. It would be all right if you took a Bible out of the rack and looked it up on page 33 about two-thirds of the way through the book, and followed along. I can assure you that this Presbyterian roof will not fall on you if Bibles are opened during a Presbyterian sermon.

Mark is in a hurry for some reason. The book he wrote is much shorter than the others by about half which is the reason Mark is a good place to begin if you have never read the Bible before. Mark is in a hurry. He uses the word "immediately" a lot. He doesn't dawdle, or editorialize much. He gets right to the point. In his introduction to the story of Jesus of Nazareth, he packs a lot of material into a few sentences. Jesus, Mark says, was baptized by John. He saw the heavens ripped open and the spirit of God descending, a little like a dove. He heard a voice say "You are my Son, the beloved: with you I am well pleased." Then that same spirit drives him into the wilderness where he remains for forty days, tempted by Satan. There are wild beasts out there in the wilderness and at the end of it angels come to him.

Think first about the spirit that descended on Jesus. Notice that Mark says that Jesus is the only one who saw it. This is intensely personal for him. It is not a public display. Mark says the same thing about the voice. Jesus alone heard it. It was for him, personally. Notice that the spirit that comes to him gently, like a dove, also <u>drives</u> him — doesn't invite him, doesn't gently lead him — <u>drives</u> him into the wilderness — or desert. Mark chooses very strong language. The spirit literally "throws him out" into the wilderness. That is quite different from the way we mostly think about the Spirit of God, gentle, calming, reassuring, comforting. Sometimes we even call the Spirit the Comforter. But here the Spirit discomforts, shakes things up, rearranges the spiritual furniture, sets Jesus on a new path, and puts him down in the wilderness.

Wilderness, by the way, is an interesting idea in the Bible. In one of our oldest stories Moses is tending sheep "beyond the wilderness" of Midian and God appears, accosts Moses in a burning bush. Moses, at the moment, is not just tending sheep, he's on the run, hiding in the wilderness. He's wanted for murder in Egypt — and it is in the wilderness of all that complexity — physical, geographical, emotional and spiritual — that God comes to Moses, blindsides him, turns him around and sends him back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom. That's the kind of thing that happens in the wilderness.

When Moses succeeds in his unlikely venture of liberating his people from slavery and leading them to the promised land, it's back to the wilderness. As the twelve tribes wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, Israel is born, tribes become a people, a law is given, a covenant made. That's the

kind of thing that happens in the wilderness. You may not volunteer to go there. You may not like it there at all. But the strong biblical suggestion is that in the wilderness it is highly likely that God will come to you and things will change and you will never be quite the same again.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says: "You are never far from the wilderness when you are in the promised land." The wilderness of unexpected illness: for instance . . . My friend, hundreds of miles away, enjoying the retirement he earned and deserved, watching the Reds, watching the horse races he always loved, sitting in a chair for eight hours last Wednesday, in a hospital gown, while chemicals dripped into his arm. Randy Pausch, sailing along in his successful academic and high tech research career, loving his wife and three children and out of the blue receiving the devastating verdict that he had just a few months to live. Pausch decided to live fully in that wilderness and share it with students and write a book before he died, *The Last Lecture*. Frederick Buechner, in an autobiographical memoir, remembers the lonely wilderness of his daughter's Anorexia Nervosa. He wanted to be a father who could and would do anything to protect his daughter and make her well until finally he understood that "He could not solve her problem because he was of course part of the problem . . . I was in hell" (Telling Secrets, p. 24-25).

The entire nation finds itself in a wilderness this morning. A severe and mostly unexpected recession, a new place for all of us who had come to assume uninterrupted economic growth, the safety and stability of our investments, insurance programs, solid banks and available credit, abundance all about us like nothing the world has ever seen, and the subtle paradigm of materialism-consumerism, that assured us that if we want it we can have it.

A newsletter I read this week said: "A recession this deep is more than a financial crisis. It is a spiritual crisis . . . This is a wilderness we hoped never to enter into" (Tom Ehrich, Leadership Development, *The Church Wellness Project*). By the way, Fourth Presbyterian Church is assembling a variety of services and resources for those dealing with practical, emotional and spiritual issues related to the economic crisis.

We are in a new place, an unsettling place and while I do not believe God is in the business of correcting and restructuring the national and global economy, I believe in God and I do believe that there are always, because God comes in the wilderness, possible redemptive, creative and good outcomes. No good, of course, comes from losing your home, your health insurance, your job. But there is the possibility that the recession will remind us and teach us something important.

The wilderness can teach us about values; the value of things: the true value of what you treasure most: your dear ones, your friends, your music, your books.

A church member sent me two interesting pieces on the economy last week: "20 Things that Won't Survive the Crisis" was funny in a painful way — your 401 (k), for instance and another one was the Hummer. "The Chinese will probably buy Hummers and make a fortune selling them as mobile homes." The other piece was "13 Unexpected Consequences of the Financial Crisis," one of which is that our children will learn from our Depression-era parents, not from us, and become savers. It reminded me of the modest and happy blue collar home in which I grew up and which by my current standards was poor — only we didn't know it at the time. It reminded me that my father, very much a Depression-era parent, took a very dim view of credit cards, never owned one and couldn't understand the logic of borrowing money instead of paying for what you bought, never quite understood why I used a credit card to buy gasoline.

The late Tim Russert, NBC News Washington Bureau Chief, editor and host of "Meet the Press," wrote a wonderful book about his father, Big Russ: a strong, gentle and always modest man — who worked hard all his life, raised his family in a blue-collar neighborhood of South Buffalo and was always admired and respected by his friends.

Big Russ loved cars, always drove used cars and used to say that someday he'd love to own a new Cadillac. His son, Tim Russert, used to say, "Dad, Someday I'm going to buy you a brand new Cadillac." "Yeah, right" Big Russ would say.

A few days before his father's 75th birthday, Russert, now very successful, called and said, "OK — I'm finally in a position to buy you a new car. When I come home for Thanksgiving we'll pick it up." He sent his dad catalogs for Cadillac, Mercedes and Lexus. "Look them over . . . You can have any car you want . . . with options."

When he came home for Thanksgiving, he said "OK, which one did you pick?" "Let's go for a ride and I'll show you" Big Russ said, and they drove to the local Ford dealership.

"A Ford? Dad, what do you want a Ford for?"

They walked into the showroom and the salesman showed Tim Russert his father's choice — a Black Crown Victoria.

"Dad — it's a cop car!"

“Isn’t she beautiful? Show him the trunk, Charlie. It’s huge — you can put three suitcases in there and two cases of beer.”

They drove the big Ford out of the dealership and Tim Russert said: “I have to ask you something. When I was a kid you always said you wanted a Cadillac. Why the Ford?”

His Dad pulled over and said, “Do I think it’s a better car? No. But if I came home with a big, fancy Cadillac, do you know what people would say? ‘What happened to Tim? He’s showing off. He got too big for us. His kid made it and now he’s driving a Cadillac.’ No, I can’t do that. This is what I want. This is who I am” (*Big Russ and Me*, p. 215-218).

If there is a bright side to this wilderness it is that we will learn again virtues we may have forgotten: modesty, frugality, responsibility, community and the real value, the precious value of the things we love most.

Kathleen Norris in a new book, *Acedia & Me*, describes her husband David’s illness and death in wilderness terms. Stuck in a cheap motel room because it was near the hospital where David was receiving treatment: television the only diversion, vending machine snacks warmed in the room’s microwave. It was a depressing wilderness. She knew how serious his respiratory situation was. Nevertheless, when he died she was “numb with loss . . . I had lost my identity as a married woman. The community of two that had constituted my marriage was no more and I had no idea how I would inhabit the devastating word, ‘widow.’ As for prayer, I was not surprised . . . that when I needed the consolation that prayer can bring, I was unable to pray” (p. 249-250).

That is the wilderness of grief, the terrible loneliness of grief which feels like utter abandonment, isolation. Finally, Kathleen found a prayer she could pray in the wilderness. It’s on the bulletin cover:

> “This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly” (*Acedia & Me*).

God comes into our wilderness. That is the promise. We are not finally alone there. In the lonely wilderness of illness and grief, angels come to wait on us, the church is there, friends are there reaching out to touch and comfort and hold us, reminders that God is there: that we are held tightly by the One who loves us.

Angels came to Jesus, reminders that he was God's beloved Son, reminders of the voice he heard on the day of his baptism.

Denise Levertov is a wonderful poet and has written a poem, "Primary Wonder," about God coming in the wilderness:

> "Days pass when I forget the mystery.
> Problems insoluble and problems offering
> their own ignored solutions
> jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
> along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
> their colored clothes; caps and bells.
> And then
> once more the quiet mystery
> is present to me, the throng's clamor
> recedes: the mystery
> that there is anything, anything at all,
> let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
> rather than void: and that, O Lord,
> Creator, Hallowed one, You still,
> hour by hour sustain it"
> (*Sands of the Well*, p. 129)

Angels came to Jesus in the wilderness, reminders of the voice he heard that day before the wilderness:

> "You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased."

Rodney Hunter, Candler School of Theology, writes: "Is it not precisely this message that we are privileged to hear . . . in the gospel of Jesus Christ — in our own unique way we are the beloved daughters and sons of God?" (*Feasting on the Word, Year B*, Vol.2).

"Must we not also recognize that through him we too have been given a name, an identity, a worth and dignity as human beings that is rooted and grounded with all the saints in the eternal, unconditional, unalterable being and love of God?"

That is the news that ripped open the heavens that day long ago when Jesus was baptized and driven by the spirit into the wilderness.

And that is the news — you are a beloved daughter — a beloved son of God — in whatever wilderness you find yourself this morning. In Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son — we are all God's beloved children.

Lent will end with Easter morning.

Amen.